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Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Narratives

(Michael Butter, Tübingen)

To say that conspiracy theories are counter-narratives that challenge the official version of events embraced by political leaders and traditional media outlets is such a truism that some definitions of conspiracy theory even propose that this is one of their defining features. However, conspiracy theories have not always been counter-narratives. Until a few decades ago, they usually were the official version of events on both sides of the Atlantic (and they still are in most regions outside of the Western world). The first part of my talk will therefore address the transformation from official to unofficial, from orthodox to heterodox and stigmatized knowledge that conspiracy theories underwent during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Moreover, to say that conspiracy theories are counter-narratives says nothing about how they – often quite successfully – attempt to unsettle official narratives. The second part of the talk will therefore discuss the rhetorical strategies through which conspiracy theories challenge the commonly accepted version of events, the processes of resemanticization and replotment they engage in to convince their audiences that, for example, the Coronavirus does not exist or is less dangerous than the flu, and that the panic around it has been carefully manufactured by the conspirators to reach their sinister goals.

Finally, one can legitimately ask if conspiracy theories have not already ceased to be counter-narratives once again in some Western countries. After all, studies show that fifty percent of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory; major news outlets like Fox News embrace them wholeheartedly, and the president of the United States articulates them regularly. However, as I will argue in the third part of the talk, conspiracy theories remain stigmatized even in the United States and thus continue to function as counter-narratives. In fact, it is exactly their status as illegitimate knowledge derided by traditional experts and epistemic authorities that makes them so attractive for populists like Donald Trump.

The radical right, the internet and European democracy

(Manuela Caiani)

This paper investigates the development of extreme right networks of communication and political activism online, in Europe. By comparing various types of organizations (i.e. political parties and social movements), and different countries from Eastern and Western Europe, the recent evolution of right wing mobilization online is illustrated and its characteristics discussed. Through a formalized Web content analysis of more than 800 extreme right websites in 10 European countries and a social network analysis the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the recent strategies of networking and communication of right wing groups in the online public sphere. The network shapes of extreme right communities online will be shown, as well as their different potentialities for the extreme right identity building and mobilization. Trends toward a transnationalization of the extreme right are detected, especially among the Identitarian right wing groups. If the Internet, and the online activities that it allows, has potentially increased the ability of such groups to address their activists, engage them in the organization's life, and spread their message to as many people as possible, the question on how much this activism online is mirrored in an increase of right wing protest outside the Net remains open.

Rechte Landnahme

(Daniela Gottschlich)

Ökologische Fragen werden zunehmend von Akteuren der extremen Rechten aufgegriffen und zwar auf zweierlei Weise: Einerseits leugnen einige rechte Akteure den menschengemachten Klimawandel. Die wissenschaftliche und politische Beschäftigung mit dem Klimawandel wird von ihnen als bloße Hysterie oder als eine große Lüge bezeichnet. Andererseits wird der Natur- und Umweltschutz von antidemokratischen Kräften als originär rechtes Themen- und Handlungsfeld verstanden und zurückzuerobert versucht. Auch rechte Akteure protestieren gegen Gentechnik und die Abholzung des Hambacher Forsts, betreiben ökologischen Landbau und fordern regionale Wirtschaftskreisläufe. Die menschenverachtenden Positionen der rechten Akteure sind nicht immer auf den ersten Blick von Positionen des demokratischen Natur- und Umweltschutzes zu unterscheiden. Daher haben in den letzten zwei bis drei Jahren journalistische, bildungspolitische und wissenschaftliche Akteure verstärkt damit begonnen, die Begriffsfüllungen und ihre Umdeutungen in diesem Bereich genauer zu analysieren. Im Vortrag werde ich vor allem diese Prozesse der Vereinnahmung von ökologischen Themenfeldern fokussieren und dabei zwei Schwerpunkte setzen.

- 1) Ökologie-Themen werden von rechten Akteuren in Grundsatzprogrammen, in Blogs, auf *YouTube* und *Spotify* aufgegriffen. Vor allem jedoch dienen verschiedene Zeitschriften wie die Wochenzeitschrift ***Junge Freiheit*** oder die NPD-Parteizeitung ***Deutsche Stimme der Verbreitung***. Auch andere Zeitschriften der extremen Rechten wie *Sezession*, *Recherche D* oder das Online-Magazin *Blaue Narzisse* schreiben vermehrt über Umwelt- und Naturschutzthemen. Jüngst wurde mit der Gründung der neuen Zeitschrift für Naturschutz „Die Kehre“ die Lücke geschlossen, die mit der Einstellung der NDP nahen Zeitschrift *Umwelt & Aktiv* entstanden war. Fast immer lautet der Subtext: Naturschutz ist Heimatschutz ist Volksschutz.

Ich werde zeigen, wie durch diese neue Rahmung rechte Akteure rassistische und antidemokratische Argumentationen in einen ökologisch orientierten „Heimatschutz“ kleiden und für die Bekämpfung von vermeintlicher „Überfremdung“ und „Umvolkung“ einsetzen und damit zunehmend nicht nur ideologische, sondern materielle rechte Landnahme insbesondere in ländlichen Räumen betreiben.

- 2) Dass rechte Akteure, wenn sie sich für Natur- und Umweltschutz engagieren, damit immer zugleich ein Gesellschafts- und Menschenbild transportieren, das von völkischem Gedankengut durchtränkt, rassistisch und sexistisch ist, werde ich im Vortrag auch am Narrativ einer vermeintlich drohenden „Überbevölkerung“ darstellen. 2019 beispielsweise erschienen im rechten Wirtschaftsmagazin des Vereins Recherche Dresden die „7 Thesen für eine konservativ-ökologische Wende“, in denen die „Überbevölkerung“ als „die Mutter aller Umweltprobleme“ bezeichnet wird. Verfasser ist der Journalist Felix Menzel, der dem von Götz Kubitschek gegründeten rechtsextremen Institut für Staatspolitik nahesteht.

Die Position, dass Bevölkerungswachstum verantwortlich für Naturzerstörung sei, dass es einen Bevölkerungsrückgang brauche und dafür Bevölkerungskontrollpolitik nötig sei, findet sich in zahlreichen Publikationen aus dem Themenfeld Nachhaltigkeit und Ökologie – nicht nur bei Akteuren der extremen Rechten. Rechte Akteure messen darüber hinaus mit zweierlei Maß: Einerseits erklären sie das Bevölkerungswachstum in „Schwellen- und Entwicklungsländern“ zum größten Problem für den Umweltschutz und wollen „Entwicklungshilfe“ an strikte Bevölkerungskontrollpolitik koppeln. Andererseits fordern sie für Deutschland „die konsequente Förderung von kinderreichen Familien“, um der angeblichen „Überfremdung“ entgegenzuwirken und den „drohenden Volkstod“ abzuwenden. Diese rassistischen Vorstellungen, dass die einen zu viel, die anderen zu wenig seien, werden in den Diskurs um die Abwendung der Klimakrise eingespeist. Im Vortrag werde ich die problematisch-ähnlichen Argumentationen von rechtem und demokratischem Naturschutz nachzeichnen und kritisieren.

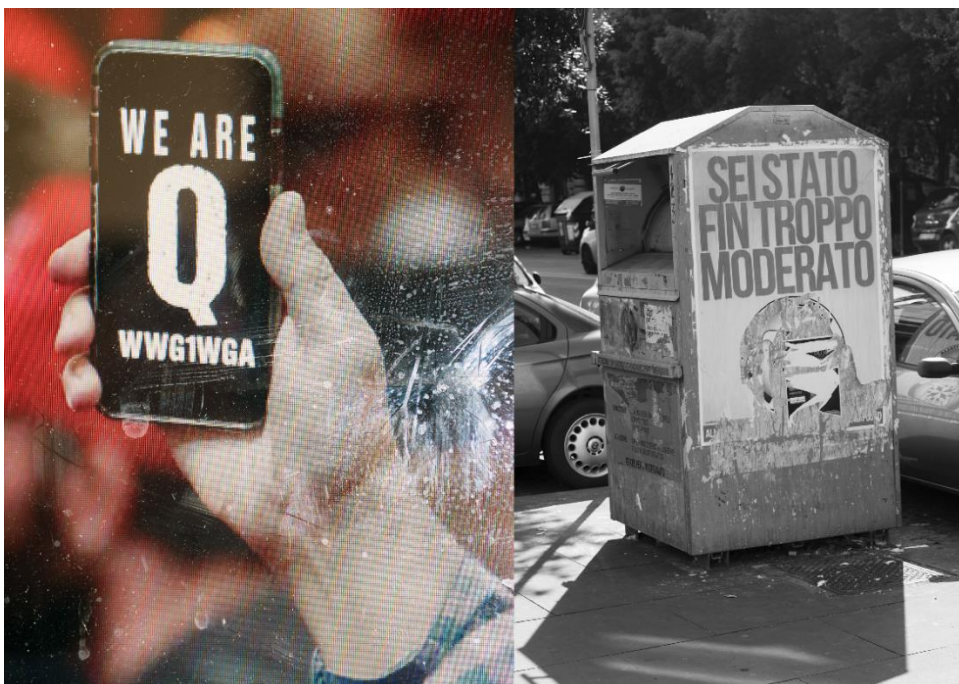
Biografie der Zeichen

(Eiko Grimberg)

Eiko Grimberg fotografiert politische Zeichen im öffentlichen Raum. Er dokumentiert Formen von Streichung, Korrektur und Kommentar als feindliche Übernahmen, Aneignungen oder Umdeutungen. So entsteht eine Art Biografie der Zeichen.

Ein besonderes Augenmerk liegt auf den Aktivitäten der neofaschistischen Gruppierung Casa Pound in Italien. Benannt nach dem Dichter und bekennenden Antisemiten Ezra Pound unterhalten die Neofaschisten des dritten Jahrtausends wie sich selbst gerne nennen, ein Netz verschiedenster politischer, sozialer und kultureller Einrichtungen inklusive eines eigenen Modelabels. Ihre kommunikative Praxis bedient sich sowohl der künstlerischen Sprache der historischen Avantgarde wie auch zeitgenössischer Streetart-Techniken und zeichnet sich insgesamt durch eine große visuelle Kompetenz und recht raffinierte Formen der Codierung aus. Den identitären Bewegungen in Frankreich, Deutschland und Österreich ist sie nicht nur deswegen Vorbild.

Volker Weiß und Eiko Grimberg zeigen, decodieren und analysieren kontaminiertes Material.



Americans construct the urban-rural divide:

Refracting discourses of division through a settler colonial past

(Emma Hart, University of St Andrews)

The urban-rural divide in the United States is a fact of social and economic difference, but it is also a construction, created by opposing political parties in a bitterly divided nation long dominated by a two-party system. This paper, a very early foray into this topic, is part of a new project on the history of America's urban-rural divide in comparative perspective. This will be a very large undertaking, but at this workshop I will concentrate on the relationship between anti-urban rhetoric and the particularities of American rurality.

As two sides of the same coin, the discursive construction of the city as a place that destroys community, morality, and the environment goes hand-in-hand with the glorification of the countryside as a repository of nature and communal values. This is a relationship that numerous scholars have explored, mostly in a contemporary context, and also more thoroughly in certain national academies than others. In France, for example, geographers and sociologists have been very interested in these dimensions of the divide. It is nevertheless a largely neglected issue in the United States, where the urban-rural divide is cited as the originator of many of the nation's recent culture wars. What is more, the historical context of the divide is neglected in almost every national discussion.

I will argue that this is especially fatal in the American context because it is a nation with a very particular rural economy that is the product of Britain's settler colonial project and the US's westward expansion. I will probe the discursive constructions of the urban and the rural in the light of this past, concentrating most closely on the impact that this particular history has had on the role played in the discourse by ecological issues and capitalism.

Contested Nationhood in the Americas

(Susanne Lachenicht, Universität Bayreuth)

From the 15th to the early 19th century, Europeans described American Indians as the natural inhabitants of the Americas who had lived there since times immemorial and as sovereign nations, in terms of sovereignty rights. With the progress of colonization, however, sovereignty rights and land claims based on specific concepts of nationhood clashed and led – in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – to the pervasive loss of nationhood, sovereignty and indigenous rights over land and its resources. With the Civil Rights Movement, Native Americans and First Nations in the US and Canada started reclaiming their status as nations, together with sovereignty rights and stewardship over territory, land and its resources.

My paper zooms into specific moments in the relationship of colonial and indigenous concepts of nationhood, related to sovereignty, territory and interactions with land. It analyses the semantics of nationhood as a set of specific cultural, political, social and economic practices and as performative acts. It especially looks into the concept of the “nation” as a travelling concept and into its fractured continuities, starting with European travel narratives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, moving to American Indian and European treaties between the later seventeenth to the late eighteenth century and then to the politics of removal, “treaties” and “extinction”. It will end with examples from today’s Canada and the US and analyse how First Nations and American Indians use today’s international concepts of nationhood and sovereignty to empower themselves as sovereign political entities on the one hand and to appropriate specific sovereignty rights together with environmental stewardship on the other.

(Un)Governing the Anthropocene, (En)countering Gaia:

Narratives for and against Anthropocentrism

(Franziska Müller, University of Hamburg)

The Anthropocene enters our world as a rupture. It breaks with the comfortable belief, that humankind was able to get away with the damages caused to the planet so far and invites us to reflect over the role of humankind as both a shaper and destroyer of the planetary ecosystem. Thus, the Anthropocene concept is characterised by a conglomerate of failure and hope. Still the dominant understanding in the western world is an optimistic one, which acknowledges the loss of political control, yet counters this with deep trust in the possibility of a socio-ecological transformation and system preservation.

This contribution will (1) reflect on the particular processes of resemanticization we can find within debates on global environmental governance and will (2) counter this with decolonial, queerfeminist and new-materialist critiques:

(1) Global environmental governance has engaged with the Anthropocene concept since more than a decade. Here, the leading debate reaffirms the idea of a common responsibility for the global ecosystem, but also feeds the assumption that harmful ecological effects were in principle governable and manageable, by accentuating how rationale agency may eventually rebalance the planetary ecosystem. Especially the concept of "planetary boundaries"¹ (Rockström 2009 et al., Rockström 2010, Steffen et al. 2011) bundles such ambitions by offering a set of indicators, that should guarantee a "safe operating space" for humanity, with environmental/earth sciences acting in a guardian-like manner. In its most recent versions, anthropocene governance even acquires a transtemporal dimension and aims at rebalancing interglacial cycles, which each last for 25.000-100.000 years. Still, this would require the creation of "transtemporal organisations" (Hanusch/Biermann 2019),

¹ The indicators of the planetary boundaries are atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, species extinction rate, nitrogene/phosphor concentration, ocean acidification, land surface converted to cropland, human consumption of water, stratospheric ozone concentration, aerosols in the atmosphere and chemical pollution.

which will still exist in future centuries. Overall, these debates are characterized by a conglomerate of failure and hope, yet with a grim built-in optimism that still upholds deep trust in the possibility of greening late-capitalism and eventually preserving the world-economic system. My contribution gives an account of these powerful narratives (Fortschrittserzählungen) by interpreting some of the most important images and graphs, namely the ones that deal with interglacial cycles, planetary indicators and the creation of a safe operating space for humanity.

(2) Yet, in being a gloomy narrative of human apocalypse, the advent of the Anthropocene can not only be understood as a call for ever stronger control over the Earth system, but also as a cry for ecological survival strategies and for a different understanding of ‘the political’. Therefore, my contribution also counters the powerful imagery of a western Anthropocene by referring to dissident perspectives, namely ‘more-than-human’, ‘more-than-man’, and ‘non-white’ perspectives. I refer to (1) approaches that *mobilize alternative ontologies* and juxtapose our perspectives on nature, civilization and wilderness (Haraway 2016, Stengers 2015) (2) approaches that seek to *queer our understanding of nature and nature-society-relations* (Alaimo 2017, Grusin 2017) as well as (3) *decolonial readings* of the Anthropocene (Lewis/Maslin 2015, Todd/Davis 2018). I synthesize these perspectives in order to come up with an alternative imagery and reflections for a political theory of Anthropocene (un)politics, love and making kin.

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“The Adaptive Consequences of Ecological Metaphors: New Ways of Talking about Mis- and Disinformation”

(Whitney M. Phillips)

Our response to the spread of mis- and disinformation online is shaped by how we understand mis- and disinformation. How we understand mis- and disinformation online--from conspiracy theories to falsehoods about Covid-19--is shaped by how we talk about it. How we tend to talk about the problem is as a media literacy nut to crack: texts to better decode, and falsehoods to better debunk. That approach has not yielded lasting solutions. In fact, as the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated, the problem of mis- and disinformation has only intensified over time. To more effectively address the problem, we need to reframe how we discuss online information. Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, reflecting on the impacts of ecological climate change, poses a similar challenge. “The stories we choose to shape our behaviors,” she writes, “have adaptive consequences.”

This talk will court these consequences by advocating for an ecological approach to false, misleading, and harmful information using a series of ecological metaphors. It begins by reframing mis- and disinformation in terms of polluted information, which highlights the broader environmental consequences of networked information, foregrounds environmental justice concerns, and sidesteps questions of intent. The second metaphor is root systems, which focuses on network structures and affordances; the processes by which information travels. The third is land cultivation, which focuses on the people spreading information, and the consequences of their everyday amplification choices. The fourth is hurricanes, which focuses on the interconnected sources of energy fueling stories forward, and how deeply entangled we all are in our networks.

As the talk will emphasize, an ecological approach to information helps facilitate more accessible public conversations about information disorder. It also works against abstraction, highlighting the material realities, complexities, and risks of digital environments - with a particular focus on the downstream consequences of digital harm. The ultimate goal is to cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for our media landscape, so that healthier fruits can flourish.

Citation: Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Populisms, Populist Democracy, and the Shifting of Meanings:

Subverting – Disfiguring – Transforming

(Hans-Jürgen Puhle)

In the paper it will be tried to find some answers to the million-dollar question of what populist aspirations and politics and the newly emerging structures of ‚populist democracy‘ (and their interactions) do to democracy in general, and to political communication and intermediation more particularly. Here the language, semantics, and the shifting of meanings are important, as are the ways and modes of agitation and propaganda, the (new) constellations of the public sphere and the influence and leverage behind the various movements and vectors of ‚Deutungsmacht‘. All these elements are, however, prefigured and conditioned by essentials of the populist creed (or ideologies), among which the most important in our context may be the dichotomic and moralistic view of the world, the Freund/Feind scheme, conspiracy theories, unmitigated partiality, intransigent ‚antiestablishmentarianism‘ (Urbinati), various simulations of ‚immediacy‘, and a voluntaristic approach to ‚facts‘ and ‚truths‘, and discourse and politics in general.

Hence it will be useful to briefly summarize, first, some essentials of our findings on the varieties of populisms through the 20th century, and second, the relevant dimensions of what I have called ‚populist democracy‘, as one of the consequences of a new ‚Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit‘ during the last decades, produced by a number of factors that have to do with: crises, advanced globalization, the availability of new electronic media (particularly social media), and the mixes of elements of ‚collective‘ and ‚connective action‘. In a third part, then, the populists‘ strategies of mobilizing, subverting, disfiguring, occupying and transforming basic topoi of political discourse and propaganda (like ‚the people‘, ‚the nation‘, ‚democracy‘, ‚we‘), their respective contexts and the resulting shifts of meanings will be explored in a number of cases that reflect the varieties of populisms, more or less democratic, of the right and of the left, in opposition and in government.

Time for Outrage? Globalization and the Emergence of Indignation as a Political Emotion

(Christine Unrau, University of Duisburg-Essen)

Around the world, people are articulating indignation and rage as a subjective motivation for activism and as a source of political legitimacy. This boom of indignation is linked with globalization in multiple ways: Not only is it a global phenomenon which has various origins and spread along certain lines of global communication. What is more, many of the objects of indignation are linked with aspects of economic, social and cultural globalization. While progressive movements like the Mexican *Zapatistas* or the Spanish *Indignados* were pioneers in the invocation of indignation, references to this particular emotion have also become widespread among right-wing populists and anti-immigration activists. In that sense, a process of re-semanticization of a political emotion can be observed. Against this background, the paper asks how we can make sense of and react to the invocations of indignation by both alter-globalization and right-wing populist movements. In order to tackle this question, the paper will first give a structured account of the recourse to indignation in both progressive and backlash movements in the context of globalization, identifying some of the multiple origins of the phenomenon and offering conceptual distinctions. Second, the meaning and validity of these invocations will be discussed with a focus on three potential criteria of evaluation, namely appropriateness, authenticity and reflexivity.

Conspiracy Theories and the Dimensionality of Politics

(Joseph Uscinski)

Ideological polarization and partisan tribalism have been blamed for the recent mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and political violence in American politics. In fact, many popular and scholarly accounts suggest that “extreme right” and “extreme left” wing people are responsible for fringe conspiracy theories, counterproductive behaviors, and racist attacks. We, however, suggest that many of such contemporary problems are not linked to traditional left-right views or polarization at all, but rather to an orthogonal “anti-establishment” dimension of opinion dominated by conspiracy, populist, and Manichean orientations. We administered two large nationally representative surveys of Americans in 2019 and 2020 to test this assertion. Not only do we find evidence for this orthogonal dimension of anti-establishment sentiment, but disturbingly, we find that this dimension of opinion is strongly correlated with sociopathy and narcissism, the acceptance of political violence, and support for populist candidates such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. We also investigated the relationship between anti-establishment views and internet use. In contrast with prevailing narratives about social media fomenting conspiratorial views, we find that Facebook and Twitter usage is not significantly correlated with the anti-establishment dimension, however there is an association with the use of Reddit and 8/4chan, platforms both known for extremist conspiracy content. Moreover, support for the QAnon movement, an online cult believing that deep state pedophiles secretly control the government, is better accounted for by anti-establishment orientations than extremist ideology or partisanship which is often argued. We put forward a theory in which strategic politicians – such as Trump and Sanders - can build coalitions by activating this alternative dimension of opinion with inflammatory, conspiratorial, and populist rhetoric to “pull” anti-establishment people into their camps. Our findings show not only the limitations of left-right considerations as sources of opinions and behaviors, but indicate the urgent need to reconceptualize the organization of mass opinion.

Verwandlungskünstler. Die semantischen Strategien der Neuen Rechten

(Volker Weiß, Hamburg)

Die gegenwärtigen Kulturkämpfe zwischen den verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen und politischen Lagern sind vom bemerkenswerten diskursiven Operationen geprägt. Zu ihnen zählen semantische Taschenspielerereien und offensive Umdeutungen von Begriffen sowie Angriffe auf etablierte Deutungsrahmen und -muster. In der politischen Kommunikation scheint das »Framing« und »Wording« einer Botschaft ebenso wichtig wie ihr Gehalt. Bereits die Interpretationsrahmen werden damit zu Streitfällen. Statt der Gegenseite argumentativ zu begegnen, werden nicht selten einfach ihre zentralen weltanschaulichen Begriffe gekapert – und im eigenen Sinne verwendet. Die Verschiebung des Signifikats unter Beibehaltung der Signifikanten eröffnet vielerlei agitatorische Möglichkeiten. Wer sich gegen faktenbasierte wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse sperrt verweist auf »alternative Fakten«, Verfechter des autoritären Staates konstruieren die »illiberale Demokratie«, Islamisten setzen gegen die Erklärung der allgemeinen Menschenrechte mittels ihrer Definition spezifisch islamischer »Menschenrechte« außer Kraft.

Das schafft mindestens Verwirrung und kann im besten Fall ganze Deutungsmuster zerstören. Ein literarisches Denkmal hat dieser Methode bereits Georg Orwell in der Beschreibung des Newspeak gesetzt. Strömungen, wie die Neue Rechte oder die Alternative Right haben diese Methode in den letzten Jahren perfektioniert. Noch in der jüngsten, bemerkenswert ahistorischen Renaissance des Begriffs »Abendland« scheint Carl Schmitts Bestimmung des politischen Kampfbegriffs durch, der je nach Feindkonstellation mit anderer Bedeutung erfüllt zum Einsatz gebracht werden kann. Dieses Vorgehen ist jedoch nicht neu. Schon während des Ersten Weltkrieges, diente ein national definierter »Sozialismus«, der nichts mit der Programmatik der internationalen Arbeiterbewegung zu tun hatte, als vaterländische Durchhalteparole.

In dieser Tradition fand sich auch während der Weimarer Republik in Büchern wie »Das Dritte Reich« des deutschen Kulturtheoretikers Arthur Moeller van den Bruck die politische Terminologie neu bestimmt. Mit diesem neuen Begriffsrepertoire konnten antirevolutionäre Kräfte plötzlich als »Revolutionäre« auftreten. So konnte eine antirepublikanische Agenda nun mit den Begriffen der Republik ausformuliert und umgesetzt werden. Anhand einiger Beispiele soll eine Brücke von den historischen Vorläufern zu ähnlichen semantischen Strategien der Gegenwart geschlagen werden.

Legitimising Colonial Rule in the 21st century. The AfD and the Politics of Remembrance

(Aram Ziai)

The parliamentary group of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has submitted a motion to the German Bundestag entitled „For a differentiated treatment of the period of German colonialism in terms of cultural policies“. Covering issues from the genocide in Southwest Africa to the debate on museums and restitution, it claims to strive for a scientific and not ideological view of German colonialism in the politics of remembrance and a more nuanced view on its merits and flaws, in contrast to an allegedly hegemonic and biased perspective dominated by cultural marxism and postcolonial studies which has managed to portray colonial rule as simply criminal.

My contribution will reconstruct the argument and analyse it from the perspective of postcolonial discourse analysis, taking into account the wider academic and public debate which can be shown to be either ignored or distorted in the AfD paper. It will trace its attempts to resignify and instrumentalise existing academic and political concepts, establish conceptual links and construct a new narrative which has the effect of legitimising racist colonial rule in the 21st century and aims at commemorating German colonialism for its achievements.